

Chapter 7: A Rude Awakening

"Nice try, Nancy Drew." --random guy

"...Not answering," the handsome man muttered to himself, tapping a finger against the desk he was leaning on as he held a cell phone up to his ear. He was a tall man--well over six and a half feet tall--and broad as well. Though he wore nothing more revealing than a pair of jeans and an ordinary gray T-shirt, the powerful grace behind his moves belied hidden muscles. His head was completely devoid of hair, but for small, carefully trimmed facial hair at his chin, and his ears were both studded by several golden earrings.

He was quite terrifying.

Actually, he would have been quite terrifying, if it weren't for the obvious gentle, intelligent tint to his brown eyes.

"You know Reno. He's probably turned the thing off," a woman--obviously the tall man's wife--said wryly from where she was curled up on the cushy maroon sofa with a book. She was physically small, with pale skin, well-groomed chestnut curls that fell to mid-back, and wide hazel eyes. An observer might have been amused at the fact that, when standing, the top of the head of the petite brunette--who was dressed immaculately, even in denim capris and a light green T-shirt--came up to about the base of her husband's neck.

The couple was in their sun-drenched high level Midgar apartment, one that they had moved into together just recently. Unpacked boxes and bags littered the sparse, white apartment, telling the story.

"...Not like him," Rude Texihera replied doubtfully, clicking the 'off' button on the small phone and staring at it for a moment, as if it were about to give up his irreverent friend's location.

The dark-haired Faye waved him off. "Reno's a big boy; he's more than capable of taking care of himself. You know that as well as I do." Her pert nose finally rose from her book as she frowned to herself at the statement. "In fact, you probably know that better."

The tan-skinned man gave a fleeting smile at that, folding the tiny silver phone closed and placing it on top of an unopened cardboard moving box.

"Probably just sleeping off a hangover somewhere," she continued, turning the page with a quiet rustle.

"Maybe." The big man dropped onto the couch beside his wife, considerable weight causing a tumultuous upheaval in the cushions. As the sofa bounced beneath her, the Icicle Inn-born woman looked up in only half-joking outrage and glared for a moment. Then she smiled and scooted along the couch to lean comfortably against him, reading all the while. The ex-Turk put a large hand on her head and quietly, fondly tousled her hair. She smiled and looked up from her book, brown eyes dancing.

The cellphone rang just then, its shrill tone interrupting the slightly sappy display of marital bliss. He leaned over, picked it up, flipped it open, and placed the comically small phone to his ear. "Yeah?"

"Rude? This is Reeve."

"Reeve."

"Well, that's friendly."

"..."

"...Never mind. Anyway, I was actually calling about Reno. He was supposed to meet me at a bar today, but he never showed up."

Rude felt the quiet comfort in his heart begin to settle into unease, and Faye looked up curiously to find his face set into stone--well, more so than usual, anyway.

"Y'know, normally, I'd say 'It's okay; Reno'll end up calling me later and saying that he was sleeping off a world record hangover or that he had some girl over or something like that.' But he was going to get drinks with me, and you know as well as I do that Reno just doesn't blow off drinking," Reeve continued.

"Yeah," was the thoughtful answer.

"So I was wondering if you've heard from him."

"Haven't since Friday. He was leaving the building; seemed to be heading for Mona's, that bar in Sector 7."

"I hadn't seen him since Friday either. I checked the apartment, but he wasn't there, and it didn't look like anyone had been there for days."

His wife tapped on his shoulder and whisper-screamed, "Rude, what's going on? Is it Reno?"

He ignored her for the moment. "Odd..."

"I know," Reeve answered. "So what should we do? You know Reno better than anyone."

"Probably off somewhere drinking after forgetting all about meeting you. Just in case though, ask around. Maybe his secretary will know where he is," Rude replied calmly in a rare piece of conversation that extended more than a few syllables.

"Okay. Good idea. And you're probably right. He's probably fine." Reeve sounded reassured.

"I'll check his favorite spots while you ask his co-workers."

"Got it. I'm already in the building anyway."

The ex-Turk shook his head in quiet bemusement. "No life."

"I know. Shit, gotta go. Bye."

"Bye." He closed the phone, stood up, and reached for the large black leather jacket draped over the back of an overstuffed armchair.

"What's going on, dammit?!" Faye planted herself in front of Rude and glared upward angrily. "Don't you tell me anything?!"

He easily ducked around the fiery brunette. "Reno was supposed to meet Reeve for drinks and never showed up."

The Juni woman stopped short in her annoyance, a note of concern finding its way into her voice. "Damn. That's not good."

"Yeah. Reeve's asking around at work, while I check out Reno's favorite places." Rude shrugged into his jacket and slid his favorite pair of designer shades over the bridge of his nose, obscuring his eyes.

Faye immediately reached for her olive green pea coat. "I'm coming, too."

He fixed her with an inscrutable stare. "No. Someone needs to be here."

Faye set her jaw in readiness for a retort, then sighed. "Fine," she replied somewhat sulkily.

"I'll be back in a few hours." He took a step forward toward the door, then thought better of it and ducked back to kiss her on the top of her curly head in a display of affection that he would be extremely embarrassed to express when anyone else was around. "Bye." The door slammed behind him.

Faye stood at the door, arms folded across her chest. "Bye," she muttered quietly.

A few hours later...

Faye checked the clock for what seemed to have been the umpteenth time, and found that exactly two minutes and twenty-three seconds had gone by since she last checked.

She threw down her dog-eared book and jumped up in exasperation. That's it! I'm tired of being the one who waits behind!

She marched off to her bedroom, and when she emerged a few moments later, she was a completely different woman. She wore a pair of old, ripped and torn, tight blue jeans, along with a plain, dirty white T-shirt and an oversized, scuffed black leather jacket. She had mussed up her hair and added a few false scars to her face

Faye examined the image in the mirror leaning up against one wall. A slow smile spread across her face. "Perfect."

She left a note for Rude on the counter, and quickly snatched up her own miniscule--hot pink-covered--cell phone and put it in her pocket. The woman hesitated over one of Rude's guns, hand hovering for a long moment before grabbing the heavy metal weapon and slipping it into her other pocket. The heavy folds of the jacket concealed the handgun.

Faye locked the apartment door behind her and caught a train to the rebuilt Sector 7, where she knew there was a bar called Mona's that was one of Reno's favorite haunts. The short woman figured she could start there after hearing Rude mention that he had seen the redhead going to there on Friday after work. She caught some odd looks on her way there; her neighborhood was not a place where the slummier residents usually showed up.

She walked along the streets to the bar, finding it surprisingly easily. Faye paused outside the door for a moment, contemplating what she was about to do. Am I insane? She pondered for a moment, then, before she could answer or change her mind, strutted through the door as if she owned the universe. Inside, it took her eyes a moment to adjust to the semi gloom.

Smoke trails curled around their owners' heads, and the low buzz of deep-voiced men talking filled the place. Big men that looked like they belonged on the open road in a truck's cab sat everywhere, playing cards and drinking. Throughout the room, Faye saw only two or three other women, and they all looked like prostitutes.

I probably should have dressed up as a guy... Faye mused belatedly, noting all of the curious and interested glances she was getting. She marched up to the bar and ordered a beer.

The bartender raised an eyebrow, but did as she asked. Faye flicked a gil chip at him and took a sip of the amber liquid out of the dirty mug.

"Hey, I'm looking for a friend of mine. Maybe you've seen him...?" she asked of the bartender casually.

The man grinned toothily, exposing that his front teeth were blackened and rotting. She resisted the urge to shudder.

"You have no idea how much I hear that, lady. It'll cost ya."

"How much?" Faye kept her gaze on him steadily, and the man seemed to realize that she was serious.

He leaned in close to her across the bar, and she could feel his warm and reeking breath on her face. "1200 gil."

She recoiled in horror; half at the price and partly at his breath. "You're crazy."

The dark-skinned bartender shrugged. "No money, no information, lady."

"I'll get it from someone else if you're asking that price." Faye drained her beer, then made as if she was going to leave.

"Hey, wait!" the large man said with a trace of desperation.

She sank back onto the ratty bar stool with a cocked eyebrow.

"I'll bargain. I'll bring the price down to 850 gil."

Faye pondered it for a moment, then shook her head. "Nope." Again, she began to stand, and the bartender stopped her with a heavy hand on her shoulder, which she quickly shrugged off of herself.

"500 gil!"

"No. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off to find a place where I can get good information for a good price," she replied, face hard.

"Wait! My final offer: 250 gil." The bartender smiled at her again--this time with a hint of lechery to the gesture--and Faye had the sudden urge to just do him a favor and knock his remaining teeth out.

"...All right."

"All right, who you lookin' for?"

"A man, about this height--" Here Faye strained upward to demonstrate with her hand. "--And skinny. Bright red hair, takes offense easily. Fights well. He may have been in here last Friday."

The man thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, lady, but I dunno who you're taking about. No one that looks like that has been in here, and I was on duty on Friday. I woulda remembered him."

She would have sagged in disappointment, but she saw a furtive, secretive look on the man's face that made her pause. She was almost certain that he had seen Reno, and he was lying.

"Y'know, I'd like to ask someone else, just to be sure." The dark-haired woman swiveled around, glancing around the bar. "Who else was here on Friday night?"

The tall, weighty man frowned. "You doubtin' my word, lady?"

She fixed him with a sharp glare. "Uhh, yeah. In my experience, bartenders always forget their customers."

"They do not!" he answered hotly, outraged at this affront to his honorable profession.

"I have yet to meet one who doesn't," Faye said haughtily.

The bartender shook his head, black dreadlocks flying. "Well, ya met me! I remember that guy! Beat the shit outta one of our regulars. He was tough as nails!" He looked defiant.

"Yeah, yeah. What did he say and do? Did he give any hint of where he might be going after that?" Faye asked eagerly.

"He said he was going to Costa del Sol to do some 'serious drinking,' and that Midgar had gotten boring. He said he was coming back today, 'round one or two o'clock. He said he wasn't telling anyone where he was going so he wouldn't be disturbed, and he paid me handsomely not to tell an..." The man recoiled and stopped talking. "Fuck."

"Don't worry about it. Here's your 250 and a little extra." Faye handed him some carefully counted gil coins, slipping the slim wallet back into her inside jacket pocket.

The man greedily pounced on the money and began to count it.

As the coins clinked, she decided to get outside, then call Rude on his cell phone with the news that she knew where Reno was. He'd be quite pissed that she'd gone to a bar in Sector 7, but the schemer knew he could never stay angry with her for long.

Faye stood up and walked to the door. What to say that will piss him off the least... 'Hey, honey! Guess where I am!' Ohh, no. Bad. Umm. 'Hi, I know where Reno is.' Better... How about if I sa... No, damn...

Lost in her own thoughts, Faye didn't notice that all conversation had halted and everyone in the bar was looking at her expectantly.

Shit. 'Reno's in Sol. Let's go there; right now! Ohh, nevermind where I got the information...' Ugh. Y--

Two hefty men stood up from a table near the door right when she passed them, and each grabbed a shoulder and lifted her right off the floor. The entire place was quietly tense, though there were one or two catcalls, and a lot of grins. The pair of tall men carried Faye off to a door, shrouded in cigarette smoke at the back of the bar.

There was a long second in which the woman didn't react. She just hung in their grasp, utterly shocked, as they passed through the door and into a tiny, cramped corridor.

Then she reacted.

The brunette screamed, kick, fought, and bit, but her diminutive size worked against her.

"Put me the hell down!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, kicking at one of the men. Her small foot fell pitifully short, but she continued to wriggle in their grasp, fighting to break free.

"Save that for later," guffawed the man with a mohawk, and he and his companion sniggered.

Cold, icy terror began to claw at her stomach; squeeze her heart. "My husband will kill you for this!" Faye's fingers strained for the gun in her pocket, but she couldn't even reach her pocket. She stopped short for a moment, considering what she had just said. "Well, I mean, I'm sure you hear that kind of thing all the time, but he really will!"

The men laughed, and the second man--the one with the greasy blond ponytail--deadpanned, "Yeah, right."

They set her down for a moment, and before she could do anything, one of them was holding down her legs, while the other snapped a pair of rusty ancient handcuffs over her wrists.

"Leave me alone, or you'll regret it!" she snarled, the fright in her soul growing by the nanosecond. The men chuckled again and Mohawk slung her over one shoulder, as though she were a sack of potatoes.

Faye made herself go limp in his arms, as if she had fainted. He snorted. "Nice try, Nancy Drew, but I ain't half as stupid as I look."

They walked through another door, to reach a room similar to the front room. It was a tad smaller and--if possible--more decrepit. Everything was in a state of decay and disarray. The bar was several wooden crates with beers stacked on top, the tables were old poker tables, and the chairs were more plastic crates. The walls were perhaps once white, but now they were a splotchy gray-brown color, the only vibrance breaking up the monotony the occasional crimson bloodstain. Thirty or so smoking, laughing, large men sat around, playing cards, drinking, and carousing. These men all wore a black jacket with the same weird symbol painted on the back; it looked like a twisted dragon of some sort.

Mohawk dumped her unceremoniously on the crude, dirty cement floor. There was a mass scrape of wood on a hard surface as the bar denizens--all male--rose from their seats to begin to stand around in a loose circle.

Faye immediately rolled to her feet and bolted, but Blond Ponytail easily grabbed her by the collar of her jacket, and she swung to a halt, gasping and choking. He threw her to the floor, where she lay on her back, half propped up on her elbows.

"Welcome to the Silver Dragon's hideout," a laughing man said, stepping out of the ranks of men to loom over her. He was well over seven feet tall, with the bulk and muscles to back it up. His green hair jutted out from his head at an impossible-looking angle, lending him the illusion of even more height.

Ohfuckohfuckohfuckohf-- Dammit! Get a hold of yourself! What would Rude or Reno or Elena do in your situation? "And what is the Silver Dragon?" Faye asked coolly, proud of the fact that the quaver in her voice was only faint; her eyes darted around, looking for an escape.

"You didn't know?" the leader asked with a slight wicked smile. "Never heard of the gang, sweetheart?"

With a sinking heart, Faye remembered where she had heard the name before. They were a gang known best for their savage rape and murders of young women.

"Nope, can't say I ever heard of you," she said calmly, though the slight flash of fear in her eyes gave her away.

"That's too bad," the man answered with a grin. "Why don't we show you why we're infamous."

There were shouts of agreement, and four or five men pressed in at her, the green-haired leader immediately crushing her to the ground with his body. The brunette gave a furious scream and lashed out at him, struggling as best as she could; spitting, biting, thwacking with her cuffed hands.

The man on top of her gave a raucous laugh, and his lips were suddenly greedily sucking at hers. He tasted of smoke and booze, and when his tongue lanced into her mouth, she immediately bit it.

He gave a muffled yelp of pain, piggy eyes burning with rage now. She threw her body upward, but didn't move an inch, trapped by his vastly superior weight. He leaned over to the right for a moment and spat out a bloody goblet of spit before returning his unwanted attentions to her. One leather glove-clad hand was pulling the bottom of her T-shirt upward while she wriggled and did her best to impede his progress.

Now sufficiently annoyed, the man leaned back for a moment, and then an unyielding metal object came out of nowhere to connect hard with the side of her head.

Everything suddenly fell out of focus, and became blurred and fuzzy as she sank into a state of unreality. This couldn't be happening; it wasn't. She watched him shove her T-shirt upward; the motion appearing to occur in slow motion. There was her belly button. The smooth flesh of her stomach. Her ribs. Then--

There were sudden shouts, and the man on top of her was gone. One minute he was there, the next ... Poof! Gun shots rang out, the sharp noises helping to partially yank her out of the state that she had fallen into.

She finally glanced up again to find a concerned brown-eyed woman standing over her, short blonde hair falling into her face. A gun was clutched in one pale, elegant, manicured hand.

"Elena?" Faye asked dazedly.

The other woman didn't say a word, and leaned down with a slim tool and quickly, expertly picked the lock on her handcuffs and threw them off of her. Elena took her arm and dragged the unresponsive smaller woman to her feet. Faye had the sense to remember to look around, and doing so, she saw Rude engaged in furious combat with several men.

Even as she watched, he lashed out with his forearm, hitting a short man in the nose with enough force to break it. As the thug staggered back, her husband caught him with a hard kick to the stomach that knocked him to the ground. Within a split second, he pivoted and slammed his foot into the back of the knee of the man who had been sneaking up behind him. Even at the same time, his fist was lashing out and connecting solidly with another gang member's jaw. He reached out with one long arm, grabbed a fourth Silver Dragon by a fistful of his shirt, and heaved him into a table.

Faye watched for several seconds with a strange sense of detachment; the mantra 'this isn't happening' repeating over and over again in her head. Instead of worrying about Rude, she was noticing just how angry he was. He wore his sunglasses, but his visible face was set and harder than she had ever seen it; she imagined that she could hear the sound of his teeth grinding above all the shouts and crashes. He was close to losing control, which she had never seen before; he was always so completely in control of his emotions.

There was somebody shaking her, and her head turned to find a pair of snapping brown eyes right in her face. "Go with Reeve!" Elena called back to her as she turned away and threw herself into the fray.

The handsome Wutaian man in question was suddenly at Faye's elbow, barely ducking one flying thug while unleashing a nasty uppercut on another's chin and sending him smashing into what remained of the makeshift bar. "Come on!" Reeve Kazuma--a middle-aged man with Wutaian features and short, thick black hair--turned to lead her off, wincing and sucking on his torn knuckles, but Faye paused.

"But what about Rude and Elena?" she protested quietly.

"You and me would just be in their way; come on!" Reeve snapped impatiently, spinning back around just in time to see the large crook standing behind her, his hand reaching for a fistful of her hair.

Six foot tall muscle-bound young man against middle-aged businessman of average height. The businessman took the only course of action available.

He forcefully drove his knee into the big man's groin.

The felon's breath escaped him in a rush of air that sounded as a pitiful squeak, and he doubled over, hands instinctively going to where he had been so grievously wounded.

Reeve used the opportunity to lean over, snatch up a miraculously unbroken beer bottle by the neck, and smash it over the injured man's head.

Rude's face looked toward Faye and her protector for a split second. "Go!" he roared at them, before turning back to the man in front of him and snapping his leg with an expert blow with his foot. As the man crumpled to the ground, screaming, the petite blonde woman beside him kicked the wretch in the side of the head, then grabbed another gang member by the head and viciously twisted. There was a crunching sound that rang out even over the noise of everything else, as Rude fought off three or four men at once, and the lifeless corpse thudded to the sound.

Sickened and dazed, Faye began to turn and leave with the waiting Reeve, but then she saw the man with green spiked hair; the one who had come close to raping her. He was standing behind the main pocket of brawlers; behind Rude and Elena and the ten or fifteen men stupidly rushing them.

He was taking a careful bead on Rude's back with a large, gleaming black handgun.

Time seemed to slow to a standstill.

As she calmly watched, Faye somehow just knew that Rude wouldn't be able to turn and stop the man in time. And she knew what she had to do.

Her hand shot into her jacket pocket and curled around the heavy, cold grip of Rude's gun that she had taken from his dresser drawer, small fingers slipping into the finger-grooves. She flicked back the safety on the snub-nosed jet black weapon as she pulled it from her pocket, and she raised her straight arm until the short barrel of the gun was pointed directly at the head of the green-haired man.

She squeezed the cold trigger.

The noise was deafening; a loud, sharp bang that left her ears ringing.

She didn't move for a long moment, her eyes closed from when they had reflexively shut as she pulled the trigger.

Seeming as though her limbs were moving of their own accord, her arm slowly, haltingly lowered, and her thumb flicked the safety back on, and her fingers released the weapon into her pocket.

Then, and only then, her eyelids fluttered open.

The gang leader; the man that she had shot at?

He lay twitching on the filthy, chipped concrete, blood pouring from a gaping, splattered hole at the base of his neck.

Rude had whirled at the sound of the shot, and he had been studying the man dying at his feet for several seconds as Elena kept the few remaining gang members off of his back. Then his eyes lifted to meet Faye's.

His sunglasses were opaque. She couldn't see his eyes. A fine sheen of blood--mainly from the man that Faye had shot, but also from the crooks that he had harmed--covered the left side of his face. And his face...his face that had always been so gentle and kind toward her... it was unreadable.

For the first time since she had met him, Faye was afraid of her husband.

And she had just killed a man for him.

Their brief eye contact only lasted a moment or two. Then he turned back to the ten or so men in front of him.

Faye felt physically sick, and wanted to drop to her knees, but she managed to stumble out of the room and down the dank corridor with a shocked Reeve at her elbow. Out in the actual Mona's Bar, they found that the denizens of the bar had been wise and fled. She dropped into the nearest empty chair, and put her head in her hands.

"I just killed someone." Her voice was soft and quiet, as if she were a frightened child.

"You had to," her companion replied uneasily after a moment. He sank into the chair across from her, kind brown eyes watching her carefully. "He tried to rape you, and would have killed Rude."

A terrible, wordless crying moan emanating from several throats came from the backroom, interrupting the quiet conversation.

There was silence for a moment, then five gunshots rang out. Then everything was quiet again.

"Did they...just...?" the black-haired man trailed off, voice quiet but eyes wide.

Rude and Elena walked out of the backroom, he wiping the blood from his face and sunglasses with a jacket sleeve, and she slipping a small handgun back into a holster at her slim waist.

Reeve, sitting across the table from Faye, buried his face in his hands and muttered something that was muffled by his palms.

Elena halted in the center of the grimy floor, while Rude continued coming toward the table where his wife and Reeve sat. The blonde woman glanced around the silent bar, brown eyes coming to rest on two men and a woman who sat, terrified, at a table in the dark corner. "None of you saw a thing, did you?" she questioned in a low, smooth voice, hand casually resting just beside the gun at her hip.

All three vehemently shook their heads in agreement and then sat completely still, as if she could not see them if they weren't moving.

The padding noise of Rude's sneakers against the floor was the only sound in the bar as he walked to the table and crouched by Faye's chair. "Are you all right?" The voice was quiet, gentle, worried... It embodied everything that she loved about the man who had always seemed so kind. She knew that behind the sunglasses, his eyes were full of concern. And she found herself wondering how he could go right from coldly killing thirty people to caring about her.

She shook her head silently.

He remained there, unmoving, wordless, waiting for her to speak. She could almost see him worry more and more as she didn't speak; she always talked. About everything, whether he wanted to hear it or not. Faye not talking...wasn't good.

After a moment, she finally quietly spoke. "I was almost raped. Okay, that's bad. But I can deal with that. What's worse is..." She sighed and turned away from him, the level of her voice dropping even further. "I just killed someone, Rude. He was alive and well one minute, then the next he was dead."

He stared at her for a moment or two, then stood. "...Get out of here." The dark-skinned man gently took Faye by the hand, pulled her to her feet, and half-carried her out to the darkening street when she didn't respond or begin walking.

Reeve slowly rose from the table, face white, and walked out the door behind them, and Elena took the rear, shooting a final menacing glare at the three bar patrons.

"Thanks," Rude said simply to the pair once all four were assembled the cracked, broken sidewalk.

"No...problem?" offered Reeve, still pale. He turned and began walking down the dingy, deserted sidewalk as cars whizzed past.

"Uhh, Reeve, are you gonna call a taxi?" questioned Elena with a quizzical frown.

The only response that she got was a low indecipherable mumble, and the troubled president of Shinra Inc. just kept walking.

Elena distinctly rolled her eyes, but started after him.

Rude raised an eyebrow, and even Faye--who was half-consciously clinging to his arm--looked faintly surprised at the woman's action. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure that idiot gets home safe; he's gonna get raped and killed walking the streets of sector 7 alone at night," was the annoyed grumble that the blonde woman threw over her shoulder.

The tall man shook his head, raised a hand, and almost immediately, a yellow checkered taxicab pulled up to the curb. He gave their address to the driver, and the car sped out into traffic.

Faye hesitated for a long moment, then leaned against Rude's chest, shaking.

"...Wish you hadn't seen that or had to do that," he said quietly, wrapping one long arm around her trembling form.

"I killed someone, Rude. I killed someone."

She wasn't hysterical. He almost wished she was; her typical refuge was talking. Emotion. Her low, quiet manner was unnerving him more than screams and tears ever could.

"Faye." The deep, resonant voice was calm and reassuring. "Faye." He tipped her chin up with one hand, and slipped his sunglasses off with the other. "Thank you."

"For what?" she questioned, looking up almost shyly to meet his brown eyes.

"You saved my life."

Her mouth compressed into a hard line, and she shook her head as she fought off tears.

"Yes, you did. I wouldn't be here if you hadn't done that," he told her firmly.

And yet again, her gaze wandered from him, and he frowned. She wouldn't look him in the eye.

"...Faye?"

"It scared the shit out of me!" she burst out with enough vehemence to cause the cab driver to glance back in the rearview mirror before returning his attention to the road.

"Yeah, that's understandab--"

"Not it. You," she interrupted, growing quiet with the last word.

For a second, he looked utterly lost and confused--and hurt. "...Me? Wh--" And then comprehension struck him; it struck him hard enough that she saw it. "Shit. You've never seen me kil... Shit." He looked absolutely horrified.

Seeing that he was tongue-tied, she spoke. "Promise me something?"

He stared at her, obviously inviting her to name it.

"Promise me..." She forced the words out past the lump in her throat. "Promise me you're still the guy I married. That you're not some bloodthirsty killing machine. Or something."

His face was horrible; guilty. "Faye, I mean I...shit." He looked away from her for a moment and rubbed the back of his head absently. "You knew my past when you married me."

"I thought it was your past," she responded, voice shaking only slightly. "Rude, I was scared of you!"

He flinched as though she had struck him. "You know I would never hurt you," he said, voice raw and low.

She nodded, biting her lip as the tears started to fall.

There was silence for a time.

"Are you hurt?" he finally asked, all traces of that wounded tone vanished.

"My head hurts," she mumbled simply, the words muffled by his chest.

"Where?"

She lifted a small hand to point to her temple. He carefully parted her hair at that point to discover a large purple-black bruise. "Looks bad enough to be a concussion; should go to the hospital."

She immediately made a faint shake of her head. "No; I'm fine."

"You really sh--"

"Rude, I'm fine."

His face showed his doubt, but he acquiesced to her wishes. "Went there to find out about Reno?" he asked gently.

"Yeah."

"Next time, call me first," he said, holding her carefully, as though she might fall to pieces in his arms.

"There won't be a next time," she responded quietly, before thinking to ask, "Did you find a clue as to where Reno is?"

Rude shook his head wordlessly, one hand resting on her shoulder, while the other traced patterns in the glass of the window.

"I know where he is."

He blinked and stared at the top of her head. "I went to that bar and found nothing."

"You don't exactly have a way with people..." she told him with a hint of her old self in the words. "It put us out of 300 gil, but Reno was planning on going to Costa del Sol yesterday. He was going to spend the night, then come back around one or two o'clock this afternoon." With every word that didn't involve the events of the past fifteen minutes, her voice sounded more and more like her, and she even looked like Faye, rather than the fragile broken stranger of a moment before.

Rude gave a faint, relieved, brief smile at that, and glanced at his watch. "It's almost ten."

"Something bad must have happened to him..." Faye trailed off.

"I'll go to Sol in the morning."

"We'll go."

"Not you."

"That didn't work out so well this time," she replied with more than a trace of bitterness, and looked up to really meet his eyes for the first time since the bar.

He caved after only a moment of those hurt hazel orbs. "...Fine."

Her gaze fell again, and there was no response but the sound of her breathing.

You better be in real trouble, Reno, otherwise I'm gonna kick your fucking ass for this, Rude vowed silently to himself.

The cab sped on through the darkened streets of Midgar.